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On Not Saying, Not Knowing and Thinking About Nothing: Adorno, Dionysius, Derrida and the Negation of Art

Abstract

This article examines accounts of negation or the apophatic in Pseudo-Dionysius, Theodor Adorno and Jacques Derrida alongside a contemporary work of art by London Fieldworks, *Null Object: Gustav Metzger Thinks About Nothing* (2011). By exploring models of negative knowledge offered in these works, it asks what happens to the work of art when it becomes preoccupied with negation and how a work of art might embody or manifest – without reproducing – philosophical discourses about negation.

I take as my starting point for this paper three failures of language – three rhetorical instances of not saying, or not being able to speak. The first is a quotation from Theodor Adorno's posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*: 'Art requires philosophy, which interprets it in order to say what it is unable to say, whereas art is only able to say it by not saying it.'¹ The second might be summarised by Wittgenstein's aphorism, 'whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent,'² but goes much further back, to the origins of the Christian tradition of negative theology in the writings of Pseudo-Denys, also known as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, a 6th-century Syrian mystic. The third is contained within the title of Jacques Derrida's essay (originally a speech), on the possibility or impossibility of not saying: 'Comment ne pas parler: dénégations.'³

What follows is an attempt to trace a shared structure in each of these confrontations with the limits of language, or the relation of speaking to its other – a relation conceived in each case via a logic of negation. To those three 'not sayings' I add an instance of not

thinking, or rather of thinking about nothing, through the work of contemporary visual artists Bruce Gilchrist and Jo Joelson, operating as London Fieldworks. Their 2011 piece *Null Object: Gustav Metzger thinks about nothing* is an intriguing visual figuration of a similar logic of negation. It invites us to consider how that logic might be understood via a non-linguistic exploration of it, and what is at stake in the idea of both negative knowledge and the negative image.

What I propose is not a genealogy of negative knowledge, still less an application of one or other theory of negation to a particular (and potentially arbitrary) aesthetic object. My contention is rather that this cluster, or constellation, of interrelated explorations of negation offers a productive way of thinking about negation itself, notably as it appears in works of art. In response to the claim advanced by Adorno, that in late modernity art becomes preoccupied with its own negativity, I ask what happens when a work of art sets out to concern itself with a kind of structural negation. Can it offer a counterpart to theories of negative knowledge without being able to speak (theoretically or otherwise)? Can asking such questions of this body of material help us think about the relationship between theory and the recalcitrant aesthetic objects it is so often forced negatively to circumscribe or circumlocute?

I begin with Adorno, then, who is concerned with precisely this relationship between theory (or philosophy, or conceptual knowledge) and the work of art: ‘Art requires philosophy, which interprets it in order to say what it is unable to say, whereas art is only able to say it by not saying it.’ In this typically paradoxical utterance, Adorno sums up the negative, or chiastic structure of his aesthetics. The work of art, whether literary, visual or musical has what Gerhard Richter has called ‘non-propositional truth content’⁴. This can be elucidated by philosophy, but can never be articulated directly as a proposition by the work itself. Philosophy translates or circumlocutes this non-propositional truth content, but cannot express it as the work of art does. The work of art’s capacity to embody a truth at all stems

from its resistance to the logic of propositions, to what Adorno calls ‘identity thinking’ – to the idea that existing concepts are adequate to account for things as they really are. Art can thus never be reduced to descriptions or theorisations of it, because such accounts rely on rational language and concepts. In refusing this logic, in not working through concepts at all, the work of art resists rationality’s totalizing tendencies. It comes to stand for the possibility of something that is beyond our habitual identity thinking and the world that such thinking has produced. It is in this sense that art speaks a truth by its ‘not saying’. It is also how the saying of philosophy comes up against its other: the art that doesn’t speak its language.

The non-propositional truth content offered by the work of art is, for Adorno, a political truth. The autonomy of the work of art is in itself an implicit critique of the world of what he calls ‘the ends-means-rationality of utility (AT, 223). Works of art are not actually completely free, because in the world we inhabit, they are always socially determined. But the paradox of a glimpse of freedom being produced by something determinate gives art its critical, oppositional distance from total determinism. In a later passage of *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno describes it as a kind of fetish – concealing an absence (the absence of freedom), but drawing attention to that absence by the very fact of *not being* the free thing it claims to be:

The truth content of artworks, which is indeed their social truth, is predicated on their fetish character. The principle of heteronomy, apparently the counterpart of fetishism, is the principle of exchange, and in it domination is masked. Only what does not submit to that principle acts as the plenipotentiary of what is free from domination; only what is useless can stand in for the stunted use value. Artworks are plenipotentiaries of things that are no longer distorted by exchange, profit, and the false needs of a degraded humanity. In the context of total semblance, art’s semblance of being-in-itself is the mask of truth. (227)

This is the basis of the negative knowledge that works of art offer for Adorno; they provide us with a negative image of freedom. In a world of ‘heteronomy’, in which every thing is determined by forces outside itself and all relations are governed by these forces (the forces

of profit and exchange, of rational utility), art's uselessness appears to exempt it from the rule. This appearance is just that – an appearance, a 'mask of truth', since there can be no absolute autonomy in this world of means-end utility. And yet, like the fetish which conceals an absence by substituting itself for the absent object, whilst also drawing attention to that absence, the mask of truth at least shows us what the truth it impersonates might look like. Art shows us a truth not by embodying it, but by being a placeholder for it. It negatively circumscribes the place of a truth which is barred to us, and is visible only as a kind of negation or inversion – in Adorno's words, as 'mirror-writing' (1978, 247) – of what is. Works of art give us a negative impression of what the world would look like from the (impossible) viewpoint of utopia.

Adorno's idea of negative knowledge, and to some extent his aesthetic theory, have been linked to the tradition of negative theology. Many writers make the connection in passing, but it has sometimes been used as the basis of a severe criticism of Adorno's late work in particular as nihilist, or in Habermas's view, as mystical, irrationalist, empty and incoherent.⁵ However, the comparison is actually more illuminating than such a view would suggest, as we shall see by turning to my second instance of not saying: the apophatic reasoning of Pseudo-Dionysius.

In negative theology, a sub-category of the Christian mystical tradition, negative, or apophatic reasoning is used to approach God, who is unknowable, ineffable and cannot be described or accounted for by human reason. This tradition thinks of God as present within his effects (i.e. creation), but not identical with them – he is not reducible to creation. In his essence, he is transcendent, beyond creation and thus beyond discursive reason which belongs to the created world. In the words of Pseudo-Dionysius in his *Divine Names*, 'It [the One] is and it is as no other being is. Cause of all existence, and therefore itself transcending existence, it alone could give an authoritative account of what it really is.'⁶ God thus exceeds

all language, all concepts: ‘The unknowing of what is beyond being is something above and beyond speech, mind, or being itself’ (49). This means that it is in effect impossible to say anything true about God. It is equally impossible to say anything false, because God always exceeds *anything* one could say about him: he is beyond language, beyond the propositions of reason.

Pseudo-Dionysius, the father of the apophatic tradition, expresses this idea in his *Mystical Theology*, via an account of the story from Exodus 19 of Moses ascending Mount Sinai and experiencing a divine vision. Moses ascends and does not see God, who cannot be looked upon, but sees ‘the place where He was’. In these heights to which the mind can rise, Dionysius continues,

He [Moses] breaks free of them, away from what sees and is seen, and he plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing. Here, renouncing all that the mind may conceive, wrapped entirely in the intangible and the invisible, he belongs completely to him who is beyond everything. Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united by a completely unknowing inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing. (137)

Moses ‘belongs completely’ to God in the experience of a kind of *jouissance* in which his very subjectivity risks dissolution. In approaching the space where God is, he sees that occupying that space can come only at the cost of giving up not only knowledge, but the very capacity to know. James Gordon Finlayson glosses this passage helpfully:

It would be wrong to think of this oneness with God as an experience of the divine presence, for in this place God remains concealed, the one who is hidden in the darkness. God’s presence is not revealed: his essence is not perceived. Nor is there anyone, any cognitive subject or knower to whom the divine presence could manifest itself.⁷

God cannot be known by any cognitive subject, nor can his being be designated with the imperfect tools of human language. Yet given that Dionysius the theologian is nonetheless writing in some sense *about* God, this surely does not mean he concludes that one should just

remain silent. Instead, in his *Divine Names* he proceeds to accumulate propositions about God, whom he refers to with the Greek pre-fix 'hyper', calling him (in the standard translation) 'super-divine, super-essential and super-good' to indicate that his essence lies beyond anything that language can define. Dionysius is moved to say all sorts of things about God – that he is, or is called 'sun, star, fire, water, wind and dew, cloud, archetypal stone, and rock, that he is all, that he is no thing' (56). He even states,

I have spoken of the images we have of him, of the forms, figures and instruments proper to him, of the places in which he lives and of the ornaments he wears. I have spoken of his anger, grief, and rage, of how he is said to be drunk and hungover, of his oaths and curses of his sleeping and waking, and indeed of all those images we have of him. (139)⁸

But these are not in any straightforward sense affirmations about God. Gordon Finlayson again:

Dionysius is of the view that affirmative or cataphatic language is inappropriate to God's divinity. The problem with ordinary affirmation is that it is determination, and the superessential being is not determinable. As he puts it, God 'does not exist here and not there'; he does not 'possess this kind of existence but not that.' To say something of God is to deny something else of him (or her, or it): For example, to say that God is light is to imply that God is not darkness. Any determinate affirmation is thus implicitly a negation or a denial. (14. Quotations from *The Divine Names*)

The accumulation of propositions is thus used not to describe God, but to provoke a crisis in language – to reveal its inadequacy as a way of approaching the divine. Language is not abandoned, but is brought to the edge of collapse by a superabundance of propositions.

In a very different context, Adorno elaborates a similar problem. For all his atheist materialism, he designates within his philosophical scheme a place of something beyond the sphere of experience, something apparently transcendent (and I will return to the problem of transcendence shortly) which is nowhere present within the world as it exists and which cannot be directly apprehended with the tools that the existing world offers. This place is

utopia, sometimes referred to as the place of non-identity, by which he means the place where we would cease to be deluded into thinking that what *is* is the real truth of things, that the world we have is the free world we *could* have. The object of Adorno's thinking is political, but he often retains religious terms to designate this utopian point. In the moving last fragment of *Minima Moralia* he describes it as the place of redemption. It is worth quoting at some length:

Finale [*Zum Ende*] – The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with its object – this alone is the task of thought. It is the simplest of all things, because the situation calls imperatively for such knowledge, indeed because consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror-writing of its opposite. But it is also the utterly impossible thing, because it presupposes a standpoint removed, even though by a hair's breadth, from the scope of existence, whereas we well know that any possible knowledge must not only be first wrested from what is, if it shall hold good, but is also marked, for this very reason, by the same distortion and indigence which it seeks to escape.⁹

Like Dionysius' God who surpasses all human attempts to know or describe him, Adorno's utopia, the truth of redemption, cannot be expressed with the means belonging to the unfree world we have, in which we think via distorting concepts that falsely purport to give us access to truth. From within this world of identity thinking and rationality, we can only apprehend the alternative indirectly, as that which it is impossible to say, but which reveals that impossibility in the form of its critique. The very impossibility of saying shows us the limits of our means. Thus the truth can be circumscribed with propositions as a space which those propositions come up against but do not penetrate – like the mystical mountain top on

which Moses is joined to God only at the cost of giving up human understanding and knows him only at the price of the subjectivity that is able to know.

This negative or apophatic logic shows itself in Adorno's approach to writing (of which the paradox of the opening quotation is a good example). He rejects systematic philosophical thinking in favour of a rhetoric of negation, chiasmus and what, drawing on Walter Benjamin, he calls the 'constellation', a punctual affirmation in relation to an object that is always subject to reconfiguration, re-framing, re-formulation. But this same logic also shows itself in the very structure of the work of art as he conceives it: as a fetish or a mask of truth. For him, this is the inherent, negative critical power of the work of art, as interpreted by philosophy: 'What art actually is, is contradiction, rejection, negation. Determinations of this kind are basic to Adorno's aesthetics.'¹⁰ But Adorno, the great admirer of Schoenberg, Kafka and Beckett observes that with modernism, art becomes more and more consciously preoccupied with negation: 'Art seeks refuge in its own negation, hoping to survive through its death' (AT, 338). Negativity, loss or absence (including the absence of an idea of art) becomes central to art's subject-matter,¹¹ raising a crucial question. Does this development (which for Adorno is an inevitable product of late capitalism) change art's capacity to embody some kind of truth? This question brings me to my fourth instance (I shall return shortly to the third instance of 'not saying'): the case of not thinking, or rather of thinking about nothing, and a good example of an art consumed by negativity.

In the second chapter of the *Mystical Theology*, Pseudo-Dionysus uses a striking analogy:

If only we lacked sight and knowledge so as to see, so as to know, unseeing and unknowing, that which lies beyond all vision and knowledge. For this would be really to see and to know: to praise the Transcendent One in a transcending way, namely through the denial of all beings. We would be like sculptors who set out to carve a statue. They remove every obstacle to

the pure view of the hidden image, and simply by this act of clearing aside they show up the beauty which is hidden. (138)

This is a familiar way of thinking about sculpture (in its manifestation as carving at least): the sculptor removes superfluous material in order to reveal a form that somehow inheres as potential in the formless matter.¹² As commentators have observed, it is quite a poor analogy for describing Dionysius' negative theological method, but it is nonetheless a suggestive one, not least because the Greek word Dionysius uses – *aphairesis*, here translated as 'clearing away' – is translated elsewhere as 'denial'. Form is revealed in an act of negation or denial of that which is not it, but which accumulates around it and thus defines it negatively.

London Field Works's *Null Object: Gustav Metzger thinks about nothing* actualizes some of the potential of this image in a compellingly literal – and negative – way. Created in 2011, the end product of this work is a sculpture made from a 50cm cube of Portland Roach stone (Fig.1). Gilchrist and Joelson's collaboration with Gustav Metzger (1926-2017) is significant here. Metzger, an artist of Polish-Jewish extraction, born and raised in Nuremberg, arrived in Britain from Germany on a Kindertransport in 1939. In 1959 he published the *Manifesto of Auto-destructive Art*, and in his own artistic practice destruction and negation played a central role. He was motivated by a strong political critique of consumption, industrialised violence and the technological domination of nature. In 1961, on the south bank of the river Thames, he performed a 'Public Demonstration of Auto-Destructive Art', which involved painting a large glass-backed screen of nylon fabric with hydrochloric acid so that it partially dissolved, revealing Metzger himself and the view of St Paul's cathedral behind him.¹³ Metzger's self-conscious negation of the work of art, his refusal to produce anything during his three year 'art strike' from 1977-1980 might be seen from Adorno's point of view as the logical end-point of a process in which modern art is progressively taken over

by the negativity which is its only response to the increasingly unfree and reified world out of which it is produced. And yet something we call art does go on being made.

For *Null Object*, Metzger was wired up to an electro-encephalograph or EEG machine and invited to think about nothing for about twenty minutes. The brainwaves produced in response to this impossible task were processed through Gilchrist and Joelson's 'Perception Depository', a database of participants' creative thoughts produced over several years of their own technologically-focused practice.¹⁴ The information was then converted into coded instructions that programmed a robotic drill to excavate the inside of the block of stone (Figs. 2-4). The resultant void inside the block is thus in some sense a negative representation of Metzger's thoughts, and more specifically of his attempt to *think* a void.

This is in a way an enactment of the process described by Pseudo-Dionysius: the clearing away or denial of matter that makes form manifest. But it is complicated in several respects. First of all, unlike the model of carving as revealing, *Null Object* does not suggest a latent 'true' form being revealed in the material. Indeed, it might even suggest the failure of such an idea. The form that results from the artists' work in this instance is not only hidden and largely inaccessible; it is also subjectively derived in a manner that is at the very least ironic, if not arbitrary, being the product of Metzger's thinking translated via an algorithm. Here again the work displays an ironic literalisation of an age-old commonplace of art theory: the Idea. There is a long tradition in which the role of the artist is seen as being to shape matter according to an idea, understood as both an image and an ideal.¹⁵ The artist transforms base matter by processing it through his or her unique imagination, investing it with a non-material, ideational – and ultimately aesthetic – dimension. In *Null Object* that notion of Idea is retained, but biologised as brain-waves, mediated by technology, hollowed out by paradox and reduced to an idea *of itself*. Moreover, the form that results from the process is present only in reverse – in its absence, as a lack.

Null Object is apophatic in its approach to thinking about nothing, recognising that this is an undertaking doomed to failure. Thoughts can be inscribed around a void, as those of Dionysius are around the idea of God. They thus constitute a place for it without being able to occupy that place. In *Null Object*, the form of 'nothing' is produced by its own negation; the impossible injunction to think about nothing results a gap, a void. In this context the choice of stone is also important. The Portland roach already contains innumerable small voids or 'ooliths', created by fossilised shells which were concreted in the limestone and then washed away over millions of years by percolating rain (Fig.5). These voids are telling, as they bring with them a way of seeing such indexical traces or second-order images. Fossils, or in this case the spaces left by them, are generally understood unproblematically as natural signs, not reliant on any code or logic other than that of contiguity or co-presence. To that extent they are treated as evidence of a presence, of a truth: ancient creatures were here and have left their trace. By contrasting the constructed void with the apparently natural ones created by the fossilised shells, *Null Object* asks what might constitute 'evidence' of thought. To this question, the work responds evasively at best.

So, where have these two 'not sayings' and a 'thinking about nothing' taken us so far? We find in each of them an analogous structure of something defined by a clearing away, a negation or a denial. It is something (God, the good life, non-linguistic thought) that cannot be accessed directly, but only known or circumscribed negatively as an absence that has left its trace. Pseudo-Dionysius uses the image of a seal and its impressions to describe the relationship between the unified, indivisible Godhead and his manifestations (62-63). Like the later theologian Bonaventure's idea of the vestige, a term whose original meaning was 'footprint', the figure of the seal conveys this sense of a lost presence which can be intuited from a negative image it has left in the world from which it is absent.¹⁶ According to Derrida this image of the seal 'figures the figuration of the unfigurable itself.' (HTAS, 50)

But these ‘not sayings’ and ‘not thinkings’ belong to very different frames of reference, and we must account for these, not least in considering *what* is being figured negatively, where it is and whether we can ever hope to access it. On the one hand, we have Pseudo-Dionysius’ vision of Moses (or the mystic) being subsumed into the ‘cloud of unknowing’ in which he is united with the divine. On the other we are faced with Adorno’s very limited faith in the advent of the good life or the non-identical which we negatively and partially intuit in the experience of art. And yet some other illuminating distinctions emerge, as I shall aim to show in the remainder of this discussion, which finally takes me to the last instance of ‘not saying’: that of Derrida.

In ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’, Derrida reflects on the relationship of his own thought to negative theology and notably to the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, having first made reference to the tradition as early as 1964 in ‘Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas’.¹⁷ When he presented on ‘Différance’ to the Société française de philosophie in 1968, a listener objected that *différance* ‘is the God of negative theology’, to which Derrida responded, notoriously, ‘It is and it is not. It is above all not.’¹⁸ It is to this incident that he implicitly refers at the beginning of his first substantial and direct engagement with negative theology in ‘How to Avoid Speaking’, noting, ‘very early on I was accused of – rather than congratulated for – trotting out the procedures of negative theology in a landscape everyone thinks they know well’ (4, translation modified).¹⁹ He goes on to rehearse several objections to negative theology that had been used by critics of his own work, who connected the two in unflattering terms. The most interesting of these criticisms, he argues, is the charge that, far from tending towards atheism as some have suggested, negative theology not only requires a God position for itself, but ‘perhaps leads us to consider the becoming-theological of all discourse’:

From the moment a proposition takes a negative form, the negativity that manifests itself need only be pushed to the limit, and it at least resembles an apophatic theology. Every time I say: X is neither this or that, neither the contrary of this nor of that, neither the simple neutralization of this nor of that with which it has *nothing in common*, being absolutely heterogeneous to or incommensurable with them, I would start to speak of God, under this name or another. God's name would then be the hyperbolic effect of that negativity or all negativity that is consistent in its discourse. (HTAS, 6)

Derrida's claim is that all negation in fact posits a 'hyperessentialised' being, a term he draws from Pseudo-Dionysius. Derrida's previous reluctance to acknowledge any affiliation with negative theology stems from his awareness of the threat this positing represents – a threat that would imperil the very principles of his endeavour:

I thought I had to forbid myself to write in the register of 'negative theology,' because I was aware of this movement toward hyperessentiality, beyond Being. What *différance*, the *trace*, and so on 'mean' – which hence *does not mean anything* – is 'before' the concept, the name, the word, 'something' that would be nothing, that no longer arises from Being, from presence or from the presence of the present, nor even from absence, and even less from some hyperessentiality. Yet the onto-theological reappropriation always remains possible [...]. (HTAS, 9)

Différance, for Derrida, is not the negation of what is – not a binary structure of difference as opposition. It does not operate via the opposition between a concept and that which the concept excludes, but rather troubles the ground on which all concepts are built. It is in this sense that it is 'before' the concept, the name, the word. Yet, as he points out, it is always subject to being reappropriated as a distinction between being and non-being – the threat of the 'onto-theological'.

Derrida's response to this threat of 'onto-theological reappropriation' could equally be a defence of Adorno's critical practice. He continues:

One can always say: hyperessentiality is precisely that, a supreme Being who remains incommensurate to the being of all that is, which *is* nothing, neither present nor absent, and so on. If the movement of this reappropriation appears in fact irrepressible, its ultimate failure is no less

necessary. But I concede that this question remains at the heart of a thinking of *différance* or of the writing of writing. It remains a question, and this is why I return to it again. (HTAS, 9)

The necessary failure evoked here is what is needed for Derrida's own project of deconstruction to succeed: the staving off of the moment at which difference fixes itself as a distinction between being and non-being. That fixing, he argues, would be nothing other than the assertion of a supreme Being, a God position, the triumph of onto-theology. And it is the process of critical engagement, 'the writing of writing' that keeps *différance* moving, holding off fixity by continually 'returning to the question'.

However, Derrida's attention to Pseudo-Dionysius in making this argument is focused on the idea of the apophatic, the theology that proceeds by denial or negation. A different reading of Dionysius' apophatism is produced by the theologian Denys Turner.²⁰ Turner observes that in fact, Pseudo-Dionysius does not privilege negative accounts of God, or negative propositions in general. Nor does he favour silence. On the contrary, as we have seen, he deploys cataphatic reasoning – the accumulation of an excess of propositions – to collapse the distinction between the two:

Negative language about God is no more apophatic in itself than is affirmative language. The apophatic is the linguistic strategy of somehow showing by means of language that which lies beyond language. It is not done, and it cannot be done, by means of negative utterances alone which are no less bits of ordinarily intelligible human discourse than are affirmations. Our negations, therefore, fail of God as much as do our affirmations.²¹

Pseudo-Dionysius proceeds not by saying *nothing* about God, or by saying he is 'not this' or 'not that'. Instead he tries to say *everything* about God, offering a profusion of propositions and images so contradictory and all-encompassing that it collapses all meaning. The cataphatic strategy thus becomes the means of breaking apart language itself:

No partial, restricted vocabulary is adequate to express the inadequacy of theological language; only language under the requirement to say everything possible can do this. It is in the profusion of our affirmations that we encounter the limits of language and then break through them into the dark silence of the transcendent. (32)

For Turner, one must thus distinguish in negative theology between ‘the strategy of *negative propositions* and the strategy of *negating the propositional*’ (35, Turner’s emphasis). It is true that for Pseudo-Dionysius, the goal of this cataphatic provocation of a linguistic crisis is to get beyond language into that ‘dark silence of the transcendent’: ‘Good theology, Denys thinks [...] leads to that silence which is found only on the other side of a general linguistic embarrassment’ (23). But this is not done, as Derrida seems to imply, by negation, but by something that looks a lot more like deconstruction than he acknowledges.

Turner notes the centrality of metaphor in the *Divine Names* of Pseudo-Dionysius. The affirmations he accumulates about God are not to be understood literally, says Turner, but as metaphors; Dionysius implicitly recognises this, even if he does not express it in those terms.²² The distinction is indeed essential to how his apophatism is to be understood. Negative metaphors can negate affirmative metaphors, since ‘what one affirms the other denies’. To this extent they work in the same way as negative and affirmative literal utterances. But beyond that similarity there is also an essential difference:

The logic of negation in respect of metaphors is beyond that different from that of literal utterances [...] in that opposed metaphors, unlike literal contradictions, can be simultaneously affirmed, in so far as to do so is to capture, by virtue of their conjunction, the failure of both to convey the reality of what is metaphorised. (38)

As metaphors, Dionysius’ manifold propositions about God are simultaneously opposed to one another and affirmed. They do not cancel out their opposites, as literal utterances would, but sit alongside each other, each exposing the limits of the other as a means of designating that which cannot be designated:

The negations of the 'perceptual' names of God do not, therefore consist in the replacement of one set of literal affirmations with their 'Aristotelian' negations, nor do they consist in the substitution of negative images for affirmative. They consist in the negations of the negations between metaphors, so as to transcend the domain of the metaphorical discourse itself, of both affirmative and negative, in the sense in which to negate is not to deny the truths which that discourse is capable of conveying, but is to denote their limitation. (38-39)

Understood in this way as a logic of metaphor and not of literal affirmation, Dionysius' apophatism looks much less 'theological' in the sense Derrida means it. If there is indeed an 'onto-theological affirmation' (Dionysius is after all a devout believer in the divine origin of all things), this is not operating via the kind of negative logic Derrida resists in his account of it. Rather it proceeds by accumulating an excess, a potentially infinite accretion in which language is made to differ less from its absent, transcendent, referent than from itself.

Of course one might still agree with Derrida that the binary logic of negation tends towards the onto-theological. He engages with negative theology precisely in order to demonstrate that *différance* is not negation, and that negative theology 'belongs, without fulfilling it, to the space of the philosophical or ontotheological promise that it seems to break [renier].'²³ Even the cataphatic process described here can be said to assert Being before or beyond language in a way that Derrida finds problematic. Dionysius' God is after all 'Cause of all beings' (136). But what would this objection mean for structures of negative knowledge more broadly? Are the negative structures of Adorno and *Null Object* stuck in a binary logic of negation or apophasis that asserts a transcendent origin and thus tends towards the onto-theological too? Do they fix negation as hyperessentialism where Derrida's essay moves on from that logic towards other ways of thinking about it?²⁴ These are certainly terms in which Adorno's thinking could be condemned as a version of negative theology. The persistent criticism of his politics of the non-identical is that it needs a transcendent (or hyperessential) position: a God position. In order to counter such accusations I return to my first account of

these negations; that is as ways of figuring the relation between language (or discursive reason) and the non-propositional truth content present within aesthetic experience. Two observations then emerge.

As it manifests itself in Adorno's own work at least, the relationship of what he calls 'philosophy' to the aesthetic object, which is in fact aesthetic *experience*, is much closer to cataphasis than to apophasis. The accumulation of propositions creates a limit, a place where the discourse comes up against the absence of its object – against art's 'not saying'. Adorno continually reapplies his language to that place, accumulating new metaphors which displace without replacing the old, shifting the ground from which his critique speaks, multiplying the angles of approach in order to map the surface of that absence.²⁵ His language is negative, but it does not negate its object (in the sense of the Derridean binary) so much as it negates or continually modifies itself. To this extent he is close to the more complex version of the apophatic offered by Dionysius. As Turner explains,

The apophatic in theology is simply the product of a properly understood cataphaticism [in that] we reach the point at which the apophatic begins by the means of the comprehensiveness of our affirmations, whose combined and mutually cancelling forces crack open the surface of language; and that it is through the fissures in our discourse that the darkness of the apophatic is glimpsed. (33)

Null Object could be said to be binary, in that it figures absence by presence, like a three-dimensional multi-stable image. Speaking about it, on the other hand, is not. In its shiftless inability to become identical with its object, critical language as understood by Adorno also avoids the hyperessentialisation which is negation's risk according to Derrida. 'Philosophy', or critique here is not a master discourse; it produced by aesthetic experience which is irreducible to it. As J.M. Bernstein puts it, 'the complex process of aesthetic negation inscribes the area where critical attention can still find a place for itself. The resultant claim is

the enigma of the work, its incomprehensibility or silence, which calls forth philosophical reflection while remaining beyond discursive redemption.²⁶

But there is another risk here; that of falling back on a crude distinction between, on the one hand, a visual metaphor of negation and on the other, the power of metaphor proper, which has no negative pole. In order to avoid this risk we need to acknowledge another particular property of the aesthetic object itself, and to take seriously its capacity to ‘speak’ as well as being spoken for. *Null Object*, like all works of art according to Adorno, is just as cracked as the surface of language that rubs up against it. A gap opens up not only in between the object and the critical discourse that cannot appropriate or account for it, but within the object itself, which is double in another sense. Like much minimalist art, *Null Object*’s blank geometric block oscillates between brute facticity and the transcendence of that facticity in favour of the aesthetic. It is both a banal object, asserted as such, and a challenge to our capacity to experience such a thing aesthetically. What is more, its form becomes an allegory for (or perhaps even a parody of) a kind of hermeneutics of depth. The fact that the impenetrable block has been penetrated, carved on the inside, tempts us to read meaning in its depths. But not only do those depths contain *literally*, nothing; it is a nothing (not) representing nothing – given form by Gustav Metzger’s non-thought. Yet it is this secondness of the object, its capacity to be and to represent, that breaks it apart. Between the object’s apophatic rhetoric of negation and our experience of it as aesthetic is what Adorno terms the ‘fracturedness’ of works of art, which is their ‘enigma’: ‘If transcendence were present in them, they would be mysteries, not enigmas; they are enigmas because, through their fracturedness, they deny what they would actually like to be.’ (AT, 126) This seems to be the lesson of Adorno’s account of aesthetic negation. Modern art may thematise its own fracturedness,²⁷ but that fracturedness is fundamental to its being. If philosophy can only

partially speak for the work of art, this is not just because the work cannot speak *for* itself. It is also because, in its fracturedness, it can never speak from a single place.

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone, 1997). Subsequent references to this text are given in the text using the abbreviation *AT*.

² This is the famous final proposition (no.7) of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, as translated in the 1922 edition. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translated by C.K. Ogden (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. 1922), 90.

³ Originally delivered as a lecture in English in Jerusalem in 1986 as ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’, this essay was first published in *Psyché: Invention de l’autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1987). Quotations are from the English version, ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’ translated by Ken Frieden in *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, edited by Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996). Subsequent references are given in the text using the abbreviation HTAS.

⁴ Gerhard Richter, ‘Aesthetic Theory and Nonpropositional Truth Content in Adorno’ in *Language Without Soil: Adorno and Late Philosophical Modernity*, edited by Gerhard Richter (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 136. Richter draws in turn on Simon Jarvis’s claim that that art has ‘a cognitive content with a non-propositional character.’ Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1998), 90.

⁵ See Jürgen Habermas, *Post-Metaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, translated by William Mark Hohengarten (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), and Albrecht Wellmer, ‘Truth,

Semblance, Reconciliation: Adorno's aesthetic redemption of modernity', *Telos*, 61 (1984-85), 89-115. The comparison is made more fully and more sympathetically by, amongst others, Hent de Vries in *Minimal Theologies: Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno and Levinas*, translated by Geoffrey Hale (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), Gerrit Steunebrink in 'Is Adorno's Philosophy a Negative Theology?' in *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology*, edited by Ilse N. Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate (NY: Fordham UP, 2000), and James Gordon Finlayson in 'On Not Being Silent in the Darkness: Adorno's Singular Apophaticism', *Harvard Theological Review* 105:1 (2012), 1-32.

⁶ Pseudo-Dionysius, *Complete Works*, edited and translated by Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 50. All quotations from Dionysius are from this edition.

⁷ Gordon Finlayson, 12.

⁸ Here Dionysius is referring to the content of his own lost or fictitious treatise, *The Symbolic Theology*. We therefore have no direct access to a text in which he speaks in this way.

⁹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*, translated by E.F.N. Jephcott. (London: Verso, 1978), 247, translation modified.

¹⁰ Christoph Menke, *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida*, translated by Neil Solomon (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), 3.

¹¹ A survey of modern engagements with the apophatic or the unsayable is offered by William Franke in his anthology *On What Cannot Be Said: Aphophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature and the Arts*, Vol.2 (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007). The first volume of the anthology surveys 'classic formulations' of the apophatic tradition, from Plato to the Early Modern period, and includes an extract from the

Divine Names. See also Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014).

¹² The image of sculpture as a clearing away of the superfluous is famously used by Plotinus in his First Ennead, Chapter 9, as an analogy for the shaping of the virtuous soul.

¹³ This piece was recreated in 2004 as part of the Tate Britain exhibition, *Art and the Sixties: This was Tomorrow*. See <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/metzger-recreation-of-first-public-demonstration-of-auto-destructive-art-t12156/text-summary>. More recently, Tate Britain ran a small exhibition of Metzger's early paintings and documents relating to his early exhibitions and activism. See <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/display/bp-spotlight-gustav-metzger-towards-auto-destructive-art-1950-1962>. A selection of Metzger's writing is contained in Metzger, *Damaged Nature, Auto-destructive Art* (Nottingham: Coracle@workfortheeyetodo, 1996). A series of dialogues between Metzger and Hans Ulrich Obrist, which took place between 1996 and 2008, has been published as Obrist, *Gustav Metzger, The Conversation Series* vol. 16 (Cologne: Walter König, 2008).

¹⁴ For more detail on the process, see Bruce Gilchrist and Jo Joelson (eds.), *Null Object: Gustav Metzger Thinks About Nothing* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2012) and the artists' website at <http://www.londonfieldworks.com>. There is of course much more to be said about the role of encoding here, and about the digital processes by which Gilchrist and Joelson mediate 'thought'. These matters lie outside the scope of the current discussion however.

¹⁵ The classic account of this tradition is Erwin Panofsky, *Idea: A Concept in Art Theory* trans. Joseph J.S. Peake (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).

¹⁶ Augustine is amongst the other theologians to conceive of the absence of God from the world in such terms. On Bonaventure's distinction between the vestige, the image and the

likeness of God, see Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 108-109.

¹⁷ Later republished in *L'Écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), translated by Alan Bass as *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

¹⁸ See *Derrida and Différance*, edited by David Wood (Warwick: Parousia Press, 1985), 130. The original French transcript of this discussion appears in the *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie* 62:3 (1968). The English translation is by David Wood, Sarah Richmond and Malcolm Barnard.

¹⁹ Derrida returned to the subject of negative theology with somewhat more enthusiasm in 'Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices', translated by John P. Leavey Jr. in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, edited by Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992). An expanded version of this piece later appeared in French as *Sauf le nom* (Paris: Galilée, 1993) and the translation in *On the Name*, edited by Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995). A number studies have been made of the relationship between Derrida's thought and the traditions of negative theology, notably Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Mary-Jane Rubenstein, "'Unknow Thyself': Apophaticism, Deconstruction, and Theology after Ontotheology,' *Modern Theology*, 19:3 (2003), 387–417 and 'Dionysius, Derrida, and the Critique Of "Ontotheology"', *Modern Theology* 24:4 (2008) 725-741; Jean-Luc Marion, 'In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of "Negative Theology"', translated by Jeffrey L. Kosky in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, edited by John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999).

²⁰ Turner does not make reference to Derrida in this discussion, but is explicitly critical of his use of negative theology in a later essay, on the basis that Derrida ignores the hierarchical complexity of difference it contains: ‘Here [in Pseudo-Dionysius] there is an hierarchical differentiation and structure within negativity, and so within “otherness”, an hierarchy which is intrinsic to the statement of his apophatism.’ Denys Turner ‘Atheism, Apophatism and “Différance”’ in *Theology ad Conversation: Towards a Relational Theology*, edited by Jacques Haers and Peter De Mey (Leuven: Leuven University Press and Peeters, 2003), 693.

²¹ Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 34-35.

²² Turner comments, ‘Like most Platonists, he lacks an adequate appreciation of the logic of metaphors’ *The Darkness of God*, 35.

²³ ‘Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices’, 310. Jean-Luc Marion, a key interlocutor in Derrida’s engagement with negative theology, objects fundamentally to this account, arguing rather (via the example of Nicolas de Cusa) that ‘According to negative theology, infinity is all we discover in God [...]. This infinity does not revert to affirmation after passing through negation, but lays bare and circumscribes the divine truth as the experience of incomprehension.’ Marion, ‘In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of “Negative Theology”’, 25. There is not scope here to rehearse theologians’ extensive responses to Derrida’s account of the apophatic tradition. Marion’s critique rests largely on claims that Derrida misrepresents the tradition and ignores the ‘third way’ of apophasis which ‘registers the ineradicable insufficiency of the concept in general’ (40). An interesting essay by Mary-Jane Rubenstein moves the discussion from the ontological to the ethical by deconstructing Pseudo-Dionysius’ account of hierarchies in the light of *différance*. Rubenstein, ‘Dionysius, Derrida, and the Critique Of “Ontotheology”’.

²⁴ Derrida's discussion begins with Plato, moves through negative theology and ends with a reading of Heidegger.

²⁵ This method is most explicitly outlined in 'The Essay as Form' in *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 1, translated by Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991). As Gillian Rose observes, 'Adorno starts from the assumption of a split and antagonistic reality which cannot be adequately represented by any system which makes its goals unity and simplicity or clarity. The essay "thinks in breaks because reality is brittle and finds its unity through the breaks, not by smoothing them over."' Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno* (London: Macmillan, 1978) 20. Quotation from 'The Essay as Form', 16.

²⁶ J.M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 253.

²⁷ 'Only in the recent past – in Kafka's damaged parables – has the fracturedness of art become thematic.' (AT, 126).

ὑπερουσίως